



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE JOURNAL OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

VOLUME 21

November 1913

NUMBER 9

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE I.W.W.

The American public has been frightened by the impressionist school of reporters and magazine writers into vital misconception and tremendous overestimate of the power and significance of the Industrial Workers of the World. This is the one outstanding fact revealed by the eighth annual convention of that organization held in Chicago late in September. It is proposed in the following paper to review the evidence in support of these assertions mainly by reference to that furnished by the convention itself, supplemented by facts verifiable through observation and testimony of members of the organization.

The first significant fact revealed by this convention, and by the whole history of the I.W.W. as well, is that this body, which claims as its mission the organization of the whole working class for the overthrow of capitalism, is pathetically weak in effective membership and has failed utterly in its efforts to attach to itself permanently a considerable body of men representative of any section of American workers.

In spite of eight years of organizing effort and unparalleled advertisement, the official roll of the convention indicated that its present paid-up membership entitled to representation does not much exceed 14,000 men, while the actual constitutional representation on the convention floor was probably less than half that number. Nor was there anything to make it appear that this was

regarded by the leaders or members as an exceptional or disappointing showing. The fact is, impossible as it may seem to those who have read the recent outpouring of alarmist literature on the subject, that this number probably comes near to representing the maximum, permanent, dues-paying membership at any time connected with the organization. For notwithstanding extravagant statements made in the past and a present claim of an enrolment approximating 100,000,¹ it is admitted by the highest official of the Industrial Workers that up to the time of the Lawrence strike the membership never reached 10,000, the highest yearly average being but 6,000; and the convention debates indicated clearly that the great bulk of those enrolled during that strike and in the succeeding period of unusual agitation and activity have retained no lasting connection with the organization. It was shown that the effective force of the union at Lawrence is already spent.² The representatives of the whole textile industry, indeed, cast but 31 votes in the convention, developing the fact that the total paid-up membership in this line of work probably does not now exceed 1,600,³ and a communication was received from one of the local unions still remaining at Lawrence complaining of the methods of the organization and threatening adhesion to the American Federation of Labor. At Akron, again, where during the rubber strike early this year apparently more than 6,000 were added to the roll, the convention vote cast indicated a present membership of 150 or thereabouts, and statements on the floor

¹ The actual membership of the I.W.W. is unknown even to the officials. The records of the general office show an average paid-up membership for the year of 14,310. It is estimated that local and national bodies have an additional dues-paying membership of 25,000 on which no per capita tax has been paid to the general organization, and that there is, besides, a nominal non-dues-paying enrolment of from 50,000 to 60,000. The truth seems to be that 100,000 or more men *have had* I.W.W. dues cards in their possession during the past five years. How much of this outlying membership fringe is now bona fide it is impossible to estimate. Some part of it represents members out of work or on strike and therefore temporarily unable to pay dues. Even this portion, however, is organically ineffective and is constantly dropping out. We seem justified therefore in taking the actual paid-up membership as the nearest approximation to the permanent effective strength of the organization.

² The membership now claimed at Lawrence is 700. After the strike it was said to be 14,000.

³ By constitutional provision one vote is allowed in the convention for every 50 members or major fraction thereof.

revealed the fact that most of those who joined at the time of the strike did not retain official connection with the union long enough to pay the second assessment of dues.¹

Evidence to the same general effect might be multiplied almost indefinitely. Everywhere the history of the organization has shown this same inability to maintain a stable and growing membership. There are without doubt reasons for this fact apart from the special character and methods of the I.W.W., but these are beside the point. The point is that by reason of lack of sufficient membership this body is and seems destined to be utterly inadequate to the tasks which it has set itself to accomplish. It aims to educate and organize the working class and claims to have discovered the effective ideals and organic basis to this end, but during eight years of strenuous effort it has succeeded in reaching and holding less than one in 2,000 of the workers of this country alone. Its first great organic tasks, if it is to attain this end, are the displacement of the American Federation of Labor, the railway brotherhoods, and the Socialist party, but it has not been able to organize effectively for these purposes a body of men equal to 1 per cent of the membership of the American Federation alone, or to one-sixtieth of those who act with the Socialist party; it proposes a united and successful direct industrial assault upon capitalism, but it has not thus far drawn to itself on this basis a permanent enrolment equal in number to the employees of many a single capitalist enterprise. Plainly no further proof is needed that those who are attached to the present order have nothing now to fear from I.W.W.-ism judged from the standpoint of mere numbers and power of appeal to the great body of the working class.

But numerical weakness is not after all the chief handicap of the I.W.W. in its struggle for positive achievement. This convention secondly brought into clearest relief the fact that this feeble body is in a state of organic chaos as the result of apparently irreconcilable internal conflict, and the history of the organization makes it appear that this state of affairs is chronic and inevitable. The conflict, the keynote of I.W.W. history, was waged in the present convention under the guise of centralization versus decentralization. It is at

¹ At the time of the strike the local purchased 11,000 dues stamps from the general office. A membership of 2,000 is claimed at present.

present objectively a contest virtually between the East and the West. The so-called decentralizers, mainly westerners, sought in the convention by every conceivable means to cut down the power and authority of the central governing body. This central authority already had been reduced almost to a shadow. As the result of previous phases of the contest the office of general president had been abolished; the executive board had been placed under control of the general referendum which could be initiated at any time and on all subjects by ten local unions in three different industries, while its efficiency had been minimized by inadequate financial support; and the locals had become to all intents and purposes autonomous bodies. But all this has brought no permanent satisfaction to the decentralizing faction. Its ultimate ideal apparently is, and has been from the beginning, not "one big union" but a loosely federated body of completely autonomous units, each free to act in time and in manner as its fancy dictates, subject to no central or constitutional guidance or restraint—in short, a body of local units with purely voluntary relationships governed in time, character, and extent of co-operation by sentiment only.

Actuated by this ideal, the decentralizers conducted in the recent convention a twelve days' assault upon what remained of central power. They attempted to abolish the general executive board; to paralyze the general organization by minimizing its financial support; to abolish the convention and provide for legislation by means of the general referendum only; to place the official organizers under the direct control of the rank and file; to reduce the general officers to the position of mere clerks, functioning only as corresponding intermediaries between the local organizations; and by other means to give to each of these local bodies complete autonomy in matters of organization, policy, action, and financial control. It matters little that at this particular convention the centralizing faction, mainly by virtue of superior parliamentary tactics, succeeded in staving off the attacks of its opponents and in saving, at least until the matter goes to referendum, the present form of the organization. The significant facts are that the same factional strife has existed from the moment when the I.W.W. was launched; and that it apparently is bound to

exist as long as the organization lasts; that the decentralizing forces, though often defeated formally, have in practice succeeded and seem bound to continue to succeed in working their will inside the organization, with the inevitable result of disintegration and organic chaos. Evidence of this is everywhere apparent. During the past year 99 locals, ignored and uncared for, went out of existence entirely; in New York the relatively strong local assembly is working at cross-purposes with the central organization and successfully defying its power; in the West, locals are being formed and managed on extra-constitutional lines; throughout this part of the country members are being expelled by one local and straightway admitted by another; so diverse are the local ideals and so uncertain the means of intercommunication that in practice it has been found generally impossible to get ten locals into the requisite harmony to initiate a referendum; sabotage is being openly practiced by the local membership against the organization itself and has recently resulted in the suspension of one of its two official organs, the *Industrial Worker*; in fact, it is freely admitted and apparently is looked upon with satisfaction by the decentralizing faction, that there are at present fifty-seven varieties of Industrial Workers of the World.

The net result is that the I.W.W., instead of being the grim, brooding power which it is pictured in popular imagination, is a body utterly incapable of strong, efficient, united action and the attainment of results of a permanent character, a body capable of local and spasmodic effort only. True, it has a constitution which provides in a most logical manner for the welding of the workers into a great, effective, organic body. But this constitution is a mere mechanical structure in the interstices of which organic accretions have here and there settled. The little organic bodies are sovereign, each of their members is a sovereign, and to both member and organic unit the constitution is a thing subject to their will. The fact is that the I.W.W. is not an organization but a loosely bound group of uncontrolled fighters. It is a symptom if you will, and in that alone, if anywhere, lies its present social significance. But decentralized as it is to the extent of organic dissipation, atomistic and rent by bitter factional strife, it has no present power of general persistent or constructive action.

The I.W.W., however, is not only weak in membership and organic unity; it possesses, further, no financial resources even in a slight degree adequate to advance and maintain its proposed organization of the working class or to carry forward any consistent assault on capitalism; and, moreover, it has shown itself incapable of controlling for its main purposes even the financial resources which it does possess. Advocates of the movement, it is true, minimize the importance of mere money in the kind of warfare which they propose to conduct. This is supposed to be one of the pregnant ideas of the direct actionists. They do not propose, it is said, like the Socialists, to support a horde of parasitic labor politicians, nor, like the trade unions, to out-wait the capitalist. They will force the capitalists to abdicate by the simple process of making it unprofitable for them to conduct industry. And this can be done practically without funds—where it will suffice—simply by keeping the worker's hands in his pockets; where this will not produce the desired result, by striking on the job. I do not purpose in this connection to enter into any discussion of the theory of direct action. All that I wish to do is to point out the fact that much of the present weakness of the I.W.W. is due to financial want and a constitutional inability to control the actual financial resources at hand. Time after time the I.W.W. has been obliged to let slip favorable opportunities for organization and has lost local bodies because it could not furnish the carfare and meal tickets necessary to send the gospel to the workers groping in darkness. Time after time it has seen promising demonstrations collapse and the workers drift away from the point of contest and from its control because it could not finance organizers and supply food and lodging to tide over the period of temporary hardship. The whole experience of the organization has, in fact, proved that, short of a condition of general and desperate distress, progressive and permanent working-class organization requires ready and continuous financial support. And here lies the most vital error in the practical theory and calculations of the I.W.W. The American workmen as a body are not, and are not likely to be, in a condition of general and desperate distress. It is, therefore, to the unskilled and casual laborers alone that the I.W.W. can bring home its appeal and to these only that it can look for the funds

to put through its organizing projects. It is this chronic financial distress that more than anything else has caused the dissipation of its membership after each of its brilliant but spasmodic efforts.

The case is made more hopeless by the inability of the organization to control the little financial power it can command. This lack of financial control is another outcome of the decentralizing mania which grips the membership. The average local has not developed the ability to conserve its own resources. Rather than support the central authority and submit to its financial management, the local suffers its funds to be dissipated by incompetent members or stolen by dishonest officials. Nothing was more striking in the recent convention than the stories of local financial losses. "All down through the line," said one delegate, "we have had experience with secretaries who absconded with funds." "No less than three have done the same thing [in our local]," was the testimony of another. This has happened three times to one local in one year according to a third statement. Indeed, so loose is the local financial control and the general interrelationship of organic units, especially in the western country, that there appears to exist a body of circulating professional agitators who make it their business to go from locality to locality for the sole purpose of getting themselves elected to the treasurer's office and absconding with the funds. The local unions do not seem to be in sufficiently close touch to ferret out the malefactors and check the practice, nor will they heed the warnings of the general office. Indeed, in some locals the feeling seems to prevail that the local secretary is entitled to what he can make way with. Such are the financial conditions in the organization which claims to have the only means of opposing to the capitalist class a solid and effective organization of the workers, and asserts that it is training the workers for the task of reorganizing and managing the industries of the country.

From what has already been said it might readily be inferred that the I.W.W. would be incapable of successful general assault on the present social and industrial organization or of any effective reconstructive effort, even though it should succeed in greatly enlarging its membership, reconciling its factions, and overcoming its financial difficulties. Such a conclusion in fact seems amply warranted. It rests on a threefold basis of fact: First, the member-

ship of the I.W.W. is and is bound to be of such a character that united, sustained, constructive action is practically impossible for it without a consistent body of ideals and a relatively permanent leadership of the highest organizing and directive quality.

As already intimated, the I.W.W. must depend for the bulk of its membership on the least capable, least developed, lowest trained, and poorest paid of American workmen. To these may be added an element made up of irresponsible atomists who are so constituted that to them all authority is an ever-present challenge. No American workman of constructive mind will permanently affiliate himself with a revolutionary industrial organization which abhors half-measures and political action, so long as he can see ahead the hope of immediate betterment through the gradual development and enforcement of an improved system of working rules and conditions. This does not mean that the I.W.W. is composed of the so-called "bum" element, as is so often asserted. Far from it. But it does mean that it is the desperate elements of the working class, the men who have not developed and cannot develop, under the existing system, organic discipline and constructive ability, to whom the I.W.W. appeals—in the East the "Hunkies" and underpaid mill hands, for the most part unasimilated Europeans; in the West the "blanket stiffs," the "timber wolves," "the dock wallopers," and the padrone-recruited construction gangs; and everywhere the man who because of temperament or oppression has become a self-directing enemy of whatever stands for authority or things as they are. One had but to observe the recent convention to recognize these types and these characteristics as predominant even in this picked assembly. Undernourishment and underdevelopment were prominent physical characteristics of the group. The broad-headed, square-jawed, forceful, and constructive type, so marked in trade-union assemblies, was conspicuous by its absence. By many of those present organic strength and action were evidently regarded as correlatives of oppression. To some these ideas seemed so foreign that the general character of the organization appeared to be unknown to them. The rule of the majority, except in so far as it applied to the local group, was repudiated many times during the course of the debates. Add to all this the presence in the assembly of members

of secret committees whose actions are beyond even the knowledge and control of the local groups—and we have a fair conception of the difficulty here presented of united and controlled action. Obviously only a body of leaders strong in intelligence and personality, bound to a consistent body of ideals, harmonious in action, and long in the saddle, could hope to weld such elements into an effective, organic whole.

But, secondly, the I.W.W. has failed to develop and sustain such a stable body of leaders and shows no capacity to do so. Of the original group of men who organized and outlined the policies of this new venture in unionism, only one was seated in the convention and only one or two besides are prominently connected with the organization at present. Moyer, Debs, Mother Jones, Pinkerton, and others, signers of the original manifesto, effective leaders of the past, many of them yet effective leaders in other labor organizations, have all disappeared from the councils of the I.W.W.—nagged out, kicked out, or driven out by despair or disgust. This result has been in part the inevitable outcome of the hatred of authority which expresses itself in the decentralizing movement. Partly, as will be shown later, it is the outcome of an incongruity and shifting of ideals within the organization; but, to no small extent, it is the product of a strong force of romantic idealism which, strange as it may seem, exists in the minds and hearts of the downtrodden constituency of the I.W.W. In spite of the fact that these men will have none of the regularly constituted authority when it makes for strength, they are hero-worshippers and are easily led for the moment by the “heroes of labor.” These heroes are the momentary leaders of strikes and of battles with the police and militia, those especially who have gone on trial and suffered imprisonment for violence or the disturbance of the public peace. They are, in general, men who themselves have not involuntarily suffered at the hands of society but have provoked its vengeance. They are largely well nourished, quick, and intelligent, but, with exceptions, they are men who have deliberately discarded all constructive ideals, deliberately thrown off social restraint, and, in the spirit of the mediaeval knight or the revolutionist of the well-to-do classes in Russia, have constituted themselves the personal avengers of the wrongs of the working

class. Such men grip the imagination of the rank and file and make of what would otherwise be an ultra-democratic organization, relatively unfitted for constructive effort, a positively destructive force in spirit and action. They are the inventors of new forms of sabotage, the guerilla leaders, the members of "secret committees," the *provocateurs* in the free-speech fights; the men who create the sentiment that the only existing standard of right is might, that opposition to authority is a virtue, that imprisonment is an honor. It is these labor heroes, rising from time to time before the admiring vision of the undisciplined membership of the I.W.W., who have displaced the men already in power and, to a large extent, have made impossible the development of a stable body of leaders capable of welding the membership by patient effort into an organic whole.

Underneath all this, however, making consistent action and therefore permanent development impossible for the I.W.W., there exists and has existed, thirdly, a fundamental conflict of ideals. Much has been made of the sabotage and other modes of direct action current among the members of the I.W.W. Because of the prevalence of these methods, the conclusion has been accepted uncritically that I.W.W.-ism is another name for syndicalism. This, however, is but a half-truth and even as such it needs qualification. The truth is that the I.W.W. is a compound entity whose elements are not entirely harmonious. It was launched in 1905 as a protest against craft unionism and the conservative attitude and policies of the American Federation of Labor. It was originally composed prevailingly of a body of men socialistically inclined who believed that betterment of the condition of the workers as a whole and permanently could be attained only by organizing all of them by industries into one big union with the ultimate object of the overthrow of the capitalist system. In order to attain this end they outlined an organization which should bring the skilled and unskilled workers into one structural body with highly centralized authority, so that the whole power, of the organization—especially its financial power—could be quickly concentrated at any one point where contest existed between the employers and the workmen, and which should co-operate with the

Socialist party on the political field. The slogans of the organization were: "Labor produces all wealth"; "might makes right"; "an injury to one an injury to all"; "no contracts and no compromise"; "industrial organization"; "one big union"; "workers of the world unite." The I.W.W. showed at this time no essential characteristics of what has since become familiar as revolutionary syndicalism.

No sooner, however, had the organization been launched than a conflict of ideals appeared. The first year saw a fatal blow struck at the idea of one big union with strong, centralized authority—in a disruption which resulted in the abolition of the office of general president of the organization. In 1908 a second split occurred which banished the Socialistic element from power. Political action was stricken from the preamble to the constitution and direct action as a revolutionary slogan arose alongside the notion of one big, centralized, industrial union. From this time forward the internal history of the I.W.W. has been a history of the conflict of these two ideals—the one, industrial unionism, standing for permanent organization of the workers and immediate benefits, requiring a strong central authority well financed; the other, revolutionary syndicalism, standing for uncontrolled agitation and guerilla warfare, whose adherents chafe against central authority and its financial support.

Out of this conflict of ideals the contest between centralization and decentralization arose. The decentralizers, mainly westerners, imbued with the revolutionary ideal because they were for the most part casual workers with no big industries to organize, whose main recourse was to stir up trouble, argued that since this was the purpose of the organization all central authority was to be reckoned as irksome restraint. The local membership could best judge when the time had come to act. A central treasury was not needed since one or a few individuals acting on their own responsibility could wreck machinery, destroy materials, and precipitate a contest with political authority. Therefore they raised the banner of decentralization and direct revolution. Thus was syndicalism born and nourished in the I.W.W. But it was mainly an instinctive syndicalism, a blind, destructive force, lacking in general the vision and

well-rounded doctrine of the European syndicalists. Even yet it is safe to say that few among the rank and file who call themselves syndicalists could state the theory of the European movement. Meanwhile in the East the relatively permanent character of the unskilled workers, and the necessity of wrenching from great industrial organizations immediate and permanent gains, still emphasized the need of regularity, authority, and permanent power—in short, industrial unionism in its original connotation. Hence syndicalism and industrial unionism have remained as conflicting ideals within the organization, preventing the development of that leadership which alone can give to the I.W.W. consistent action, permanent growth, and effective power. So long as the conflict holds, the organization must remain weak, spasmodic in action, and destructive in results.

But it is doubtful if the final triumph of either of these ideals would suffice to make of the I.W.W. a real power in this country. In this connection two points need emphasis: first, in so far as the I.W.W. aspires to represent syndicalism pure and simple the conditions are not here for its growth. Syndicalism as it has developed in this country is a doctrine of despair. However much its proponents may attempt to stress its ultimate ideal—the rebuilding of industrial society—it is essentially a destructive philosophy. As stated above, it will not be adopted, except temporarily and under special stress, by any body of workmen who see hope ahead in gradual betterment through constructive industrial and political action. Such a body is the organizing element of the American working class as evidenced by the $2\frac{1}{2}$ million trade unionists, and the growth of the Socialist party since it has taken an opportunist position.

Secondly, in so far as the I.W.W. aspires to represent the movement toward industrial unionism, the field of action is already occupied. The American Federation of Labor through its local councils, its central organizations, its system federations, its departments, and its amalgamated craft unions, is creating the machinery for the practical expression of the industrial union ideal as rapidly as the circumstances of the worker's life and needs allow of its development. The process is perhaps slow but it is sure and

effective. It is proceeding by the trial-and-error method which alone has proved adequate to the permanent advancement of the interests of the workers. And when it is considered further that within the American Federation one industrial union alone outnumbers in membership the whole effective force of the I.W.W. in the proportion of 20 to 1, the prospect that the latter will be able to oust its rival from the field becomes too small for consideration.

The fact is that the I.W.W. faces a perpetual dilemma. The bulk of the American workmen want more here and now for themselves and their immediate associates and care little for the remote future or the revolutionary ideal. These will have none of the I.W.W. The others have not, and under the existing conditions cannot develop the capacity for sustained organic effort. Whichever way the organization turns, then, it seems doomed to failure.

Viewing the situation in any reasonable light, therefore, we find it difficult to escape the conclusion that the Industrial Workers of the World as a positive social factor is more an object of pathetic interest than of fear. It has succeeded in impressing itself upon the popular imagination as a mysterious, incalculable force likely to appear and work destruction at any time and place. It has terrified the public because its small body of irresponsible and foot-loose agitators scent trouble from afar and flock to the point where social rupture seems to be for the moment imminent. They are like Morgan's raiders. By rapidity of movement and sheer audacity they have created the impression of a great organized force. But in reality they are incapable of anything but spasmodic and disconnected action. As a means for calling attention to the fact that machinery is breaking down the distinction between skilled and unskilled labor and is thus rendering craft organization ineffective; as an instrument for rousing the public to a consciousness of the suffering and needs of the unskilled and transient workers and of the existence here of a compelling social problem; as a spur to the activity of the more conservative and exclusive labor organizations, the I.W.W. may have a useful social function. As a directly effective social force, however, it has no considerable significance.

R. F. HOXIE